



AMERICA SPEAKS

ENGAGING CITIZEN VOICES IN GOVERNANCE

*Hope is like a path
in the countryside.*

At first there was no path.

*But then,
as more and more people
walked a new way,
a path emerged.*

- A Chinese Poem

Creating Effective Civic Mechanisms for Our Democracy

A major challenge facing America as a self-governing nation is to create and make workable effective mechanisms to ensure that the actions of elected office holders reflect the will of citizens. We must strengthen our democracy by creating mechanisms that are accessible to the public and reflect the realities of the 21st century.

AmericaSpeaks is a non-partisan, non-profit organization founded to create innovative mechanisms – local, regional and national – through which citizens can express their voice on public policy priorities, reconnecting and re-empowering them to bring energy, creative initiative, and activism at every level of government. Core to our mission and to the projects we pursue is to engage Americans *from all walks of life* in a debate about their future and their priorities and to provide a framework within which they can help policy makers and planners develop more effective solutions.

Bringing "Town Meetings" to a Larger Scale

Much of our work – and our success – is rooted in a high profile and ground-breaking project that AmericaSpeaks' executive director, Carolyn Lukensmeyer, led in 1997 and 1998. That project, Americans Discuss Social Security, engaged tens of thousands of citizens in 25 states in a national dialogue and deliberation about the future of social security.

The forums for this project were town meetings but unlike most town forums held today – where panels of experts talk for the majority of the time and citizens get to ask a few questions. Our forums were designed to assemble 150-750 citizens in a large room, gathered at round tables, each seating ten to twelve, supported by the latest in information technologies to enhance their discussion. We quickly demonstrated that: (1) it is possible to engage large numbers of citizens on critical issues of public policy; and (2) citizens will commit the time and energy to learn the facts and context of an issue and develop a shared agreement that reflects their best judgement for future action.

Our Goal

Thus, our goal has become, whenever possible, to take the best of the New England town meeting - citizens talking with citizens to solve problems - and utilize technology to efficiently and effectively involve hundreds of citizens simultaneously. Our success is based on the unique blend of perspectives our associates bring together in large systems change, strategic planning in a public context, the design and facilitation of large group interactive processes incorporating the best uses of technology, and community organizing.

Our Experience

AmericaSpeaks has an established reputation in the arena of civic engagement, extensive experience in both public and private large systems change, and has been honored by the International Association for Public Participation, CIVICUS, the European Commission, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

1612 19th Street, N.W., Suite 408
Washington, DC 20009
Ph: (202) 299-0126
Fax: (202) 299-0128
<http://www.americaspeaks.org>



Our Principles

Although every large meeting we convene is different and customized, they all have similar characteristics:

- **Representative:** Broad, demographically representative participation from the community which lends the forum's product credibility
- **Facilitation:** High-quality, neutral facilitation to ensure that everyone who participates has a meaningful experience and feels that his or her voice has been heard
- **Technology:** Appropriate use of decision-making technology to support citizen discussions and improve the process by which input is analyzed.
- **Public Information:** High quality public information materials to ensure that participants have the ability to participate in informed discussions
- **Transparency:** Public transparency in how input from the forum will influence the development of the strategic plan, budget and other activities—to build trust with participants and keep the process accessible
- **Follow-Up:** Follow-up documentation and forums to inform the public how their input was used to develop the strategic plan and budget and influence service delivery—building support for the client organization's agenda and trust in the process.

Our Projects: Some Examples

Americans Discuss Social Security

In 1997-1998, Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, Executive Director of AmericaSpeaks, directed The Pew Charitable Trusts' \$12.5 million project, Americans Discuss Social Security. The project's mission was to engage Americans from all walks of life in a nationwide debate about the future of Social Security, and to provide a framework within which these citizens could help policy makers in Congress resolve the issue. In fifteen months, ADSS held community forums in 25 states, engaging and informing more than 45,000 Americans who reflected the country's population by age, income, gender, rural/urban environments, and ethnic/racial background. These citizens spent four to six hours on a Saturday learning detailed information about the Social Security program as it works today and exploring options for reform.

Neighborhood Action, Washington, D.C.

From 1999-2000, AmericaSpeaks worked with the District of Columbia's Mayor's Office (Mayor Anthony Williams) to design and facilitate a large-scale citizen participation process which shaped the development of the City's Strategic Plan and FY2001 budget. Following two Citizen Summits, AmericaSpeaks worked with a staff team from the Mayor's Office and professors from George Washington University to analyze citizen priorities in relation to a first draft of the District's City-Wide Strategic Plan. AmericaSpeaks then worked with Mayor's Office staff and agency directors to refine the strategic plan and develop the city's budget based on the plan. AmericaSpeaks also worked with the District's Office of Communications and Office of the Public Advocate to design a strategy to communicate the budget and strategic plan to the public. This process was honored by the International Association for Public Participation as its Project of the Year and named a Best Practice by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Youth Summit, Washington, D.C.

After convening the successful Citizen Summit, the Williams Administration turned towards creating a similar opportunity for the District's young people. Throughout the Summer and Fall, AmericaSpeaks worked with the Youth Summit Advisory Board, made up of young people and leaders of community-based organizations, to plan, design, and facilitate the Summit. On November 20, 2000, 1,400 young people, aged 14-21, met to prioritize the top youth-related issues in shaping the city's policy and budget priorities for 2001 and 2002. The Summit was followed up with a meeting in December of 125 participants and a meeting in February with 250 participants to suggest additional actions, prioritize recommendations, and develop additional youth governance mechanisms in the city. In addition to implementing a new process for youth voice in government the Mayor has committed to establishing a "youth scorecard" based on the Summit's recommendations

So persuasive is the power of the institutions we have created that they shape not only our preferences, but actually our sense of possibilities.

- Ivan Illich

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